

# Footcare and the re-enactor

Despite the cliches about an army moving on its stomach, the bottom line is that an army plods along on the feet of the common soldier. With that in mind, this article is the beginning of a series that examines health and re-enactment. We will examine foot care, digestive health and heat/cold-related emergencies as well as other health-related issues pertaining to re-enacting. As we near campaign season we are preparing to call upon our feet to carry us through several days worth of marching and fighting. We will be wearing footwear which is not our usual walking shoes as well as carrying all of our necessary supplies. While we strive to get a feel of what our forebears experienced we are not accustomed to the trekking that the common foot soldier would have experienced in the 1860's. These days we are more accustomed to carpeting, cushioned footwear, bathing daily, access to medical care and other factors which lull us into a secure state where our health is concerned. This article will briefly concentrate on those factors which give rise to illness and injury as well as preventative measures and ameliorating interventions (those things we can do to fix the "boo boos").

Everyone should start with good footwear. Examine your brogans for excess wear or any areas of ill fit. If possible, repair or replace excessively worn brogans before the campaign. A few extra bucks here can save a lot of pain and money after the campaign. Make sure that your footwear fits and is comfortable. Add cushioned insoles to increase comfort and, to decrease shock to your feet, knees, hips, and spine. Do not wear socks with holes. While this may give the added feel of campaigning, they expose your feet to the raw friction of the leather of your shoes. Socks should also fit snugly and should not shift with each step. This can cause blisters to form. It is recommended that polypropylene socks be worn beneath your wool stockings to "wick" moisture away from your skin and decrease the chance of blisters. Some old soldiers advocate rubbing the inside of socks with soap to prevent blisters. Remember that our modern soaps have chemicals, which are not meant to have prolonged contact with the skin.

Examine your feet before the march. No good can come from ignoring that ingrown toenail or painful spur until it hits you at the end of the first day that you will not be able to make the second day's march. Now we get a little personal. Clip your toenails before the campaign. Toenails, which have grown too long or out of alignment, can cut or rub painful blisters. While on the subject of toenails we need to discuss the problem of wearing wet footwear and marching through water and mud. I'm not sure if anyone else had the misfortune of contracting "Shiloh feet" but I did. It taught me a valuable lesson. While we marched through 6-18" high water no one, including me stopped to think what must be in the soil. As mentioned before ingrown toenails can be painful. They can also be a port of entry for bacteria and fungus. Wet soil and standing water can contain both, especially fungus and this is especially true of any river valley in the south. When we waded through swamps and mud-holes we allow our brogans to fill with this fungus-infested water, imbedding itself in our shoes, socks and any opening in our feet. This soldier found that a week after Shiloh a fungus had developed on both great toes (under the nail) and on the brogans that I had been wearing despite a thorough cleaning of both. Several doctor visits and multiple anti-fungal creams later, I found that I had invested \$450 on repairing what I could have prevented to some degree. Live and learn.

What should be done to prevent "Shiloh feet"? First, apply powder to your shoes before putting them on. Spray anti-fungal powders are the best as they will soak into the leather and provide a long lasting barrier against the formation of fungal colonies in the leather uppers. Second, take off your shoes and socks each night, dry and powder your feet. Carry a small amount of powder for this purpose. Anti-fungal or cornstarch-based is best but you can carry plain cornstarch for this purpose-it's cheap. The main purpose here is to allow your feet the benefit of oxygen. Anaerobic bacteria, (those bacteria which do not require oxygen to live), are infamous for breaking down

tissue and allowing fungus to set up housekeeping there. Third, massage the feet and toes before retiring for the night. As well as a stress reliever this actually stimulates circulation and provides the soldier the chance to examine the feet and thereby stay ahead of any potential problems.

One of the ever-present problems of marching is a blister. For those of you who have the sick urge to pop or lance blisters here's one word of advice-DON'T. Unless you have an affinity for a blister within a blister or for those

little fungi and bacteria that I spoke of earlier, leave the things intact and wash them thoroughly with soap and water (water alone is better than nothing) dry the area and cover them with moleskin-NOT band-aides. Follow that up by putting on dry socks.

(Have I mentioned the need for one pair of socks for each day in the field? Argue the point if you would like, it's your health.) Moleskin cushions and protects while band aides can increase friction and even rub new blisters. If a blister does break, wash it thoroughly and leave it open to the air while you sleep. If conditions in your tent are less than dry you may cover it loosely with a band-aide during the night. Apply moleskin over it the next morning before you resume the march.

A few important hints here can keep you from a nasty infection. First, do not allow anyone including yourself to pour peroxide into an open wound. Peroxide burns tissue and delays healing as well as killing your skin's "friendly" bacteria which allows overgrowth of ineffective

strains of bacteria. Second, do not apply antibiotic ointments or creams unless you have the ability to wash them off and reapply the every 4-6

hours. These ointments lose their bacteria-fighting capabilities after a short time and the gooey base is just a medium (home) for any bacteria that wants to set up housekeeping there. Third, never tear away dead skin covering a blister while in the field. This skin provides some protection from nature and removing it exposes new skin that has yet to develop the toughness and protective oils of the surrounding tissue.

A few closing remarks and then we'll hit the road. Wear your shoes at all times when in the field unless you are lying or sitting around the camp and have no intentions of being up walking around. Besides sticks, rocks and trash on the ground there are insects, snakes and fire brands that lurk in the shadows just waiting to ruin your weekend.

And finally allow me to get up on my soapbox. Some folks in this hobby turn their noses up at anything "farby" or modern. While I find it admirable to attempt to get as close as possible to the experiences of those men that we portray, I find it ludicrous to endanger your health by refusing to carry or use items such as moleskin, anti-fungal powder or polypropylene socks. This is a hobby. Long after you have fired your last cartridge you'll need your feet to carry you back to your "farby" vehicle and back home to your modern job. (You know that thing you do to enable you to enjoy this hobby, make car payments and put a roof over your head?). If you ignore your health you may find yourself unable to participate fully in future events. You may also find yourself a bit poorer and unable to buy that new tent, gun, etc. (i.e. my bank account minus \$450 for the treatment of "Shiloh feet").

Now that we know a little more about those two things attached to the far end of our legs ... FORWARD, MARCH!

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